

Engaging Teachers in Ed Reform

Robin Steans, Advance Illinois

Teacher engagement is crucial to the success of education reforms. Not only can teachers serve as policymakers' eyes and ears on the ground, sharing firsthand knowledge of challenges in the classroom, but their advocacy can be instrumental to passing smart, sensible policies, and their buy-in can make or break reform implementation. Ongoing teacher participation can help identify potential hurdles to policy implementation, thereby ensuring a smooth transition period. Teacher insight can mean the difference between well-intentioned but ultimately ineffective bureaucratic adjustments, and transformative changes that directly impact student progress. In the past, teacher unions served as the most common way for teachers to engage in policy decisions. With the advent of groups like Teach Plus, Viva, and Educators for Excellence, teachers now have more ways to engage in policy work, and policymakers across the country are taking increasing advantage of teacher voice in each step of the policymaking process.

What does teacher engagement in the reform process look like?

Informing the policymaking process

The work of Educators for Excellence (E4E), a teacher-led organization operating in New York and Los Angeles, showcases how teacher-generated ideas can inform the policymaking process. E4E focuses on supporting teacher understanding of how various education policies impact students and their profession, on building a dynamic network of educators and policymakers, and on encouraging them to actively participate in the policy process by advocating for teacher leadership and collaboration at their schools, pushing for policies at the district and state level that include teacher-created recommendations, and getting involved with their unions to ensure their opinions are represented. In just two years, E4E has grown into a national network of over 7,000 progressive teachers engaging in this work.

In the past year alone, E4E teacher policy teams have authored a slew of pragmatic recommendations addressing some of the most hot-button issues in education reform. E4E teachers in Los Angeles spent several months researching the most effective way to improve the feedback and support teachers receive to improve their performance in the classroom. They published a report this summer advocating for the creation of a flexible evaluation system that would base 50 percent of a teacher's annual review on multiple classroom observations by administrators and peers and 40 percent on multiple measures of student growth. One of E4E teachers put it best, saying, "We have taken on the complexity and controversy of this issue and produced a new way forward for teacher evaluation, one that unites ideas from our union and our district and considers input from our peers, community members and, most important, our students. Our goal is to start a conversation about solutions that create pathways for collaboration and consensus."

In 2011, New York City faced the threat of nearly 6,000 teacher layoffs, which would have been done in "last in, first out" order, in accordance with state law. E4E's teacher policy team proposed a rational solution that would have made these tough decisions in a fair and objective way for teachers but much more closely aligned with student achievement. E4E teachers recommended using undocumented absenteeism, consecutive "unsatisfactory" ratings, and those in the city's Absent Teacher Reserve Pool (teachers receiving full salary and benefits, but without a current position). After presenting their recommendations to political leaders, SB 3501 was re-introduced to include E4E's layoff criteria. Over 1,500 E4E teachers made contact with their elected officials to demonstrate support for the bill, demonstrating the power of teachers crafting policy solutions and then advocating for implementation.

Fostering support for key policies and driving reform

Advance Illinois's Educator Advisory Council has demonstrated that educators can influence the policy process, not only by informing the debate, but also by providing key legislators and stakeholders with an authentic perspective on what to prioritize and how certain reforms will impact the classroom. The Educator Advisory Council is comprised of a core group of active and recently retired award-winning teachers and principals who represent students, classrooms, schools, and districts across grade levels, content areas, and Illinois' diverse geography. While initially convened as a sounding board and partner to the Advance Illinois team as it shaped policy, it became clear that the real power of the group lay in the outreach they could do with policy-makers and other thought leaders.

As Advance Illinois worked to address sometimes controversial issues and promote particular reforms, EAC members were eager to talk directly with legislators, agency leaders, and others with concerns or influence. For example, their cogent explanation of the importance of reforms to principal training (being fought hard by some universities and other stakeholders) were critical to maintaining gains during the rule-making process. Their honest commentary on why proposed changes to seniority and other certification and personnel policies proposed in SB7 were necessary and desirable visibly influenced legislators and helped empower leaders to withstand objections when some stakeholders opposed legislation late in the process. Finally, when the Illinois State Board of Education encountered serious pushback to significantly raising expectations for candidates entering teacher preparation programs, teachers from the Educator Advisory Council and beyond provided compelling testimony that served to defuse ugly insinuations that academic readiness and diversity were at odds and to add credibility to the agency's argument that the more rigorous Common Core standards required a fresh look at the level of readiness teachers needed as they entered the classroom.

As a result of the impact direct teacher testimony has had on these and other issues—testimony generally unheard of in Springfield—elected officials and agency leaders are increasingly interested in hearing from teachers earlier in the process of

shaping policy. As a result, the Educator Advisory Council now serves as a key resource for legislators, state agency leadership, and community activists, and is a continuous link to both Advance Illinois and policymakers as they consider decisions about legislative and regulatory changes in Illinois's educational systems and climate. Its members currently participate in working groups on teacher certification requirements and tightening transitions between high school and postsecondary education. In addition, they worked with the Illinois State Board of Education to co-host a two-day convening of teachers to talk through next-steps and issues relating to a number of reforms in process across the state, including new teacher and principal evaluations, changes to teacher certification and re-certification, and the implementation of the Common Core.¹ In short, policy makers and education leaders are increasingly coming to rely on direct teacher voice, recognizing that it has a unique power and value in both informing and driving change.

Informing policy implementation

The VIVA Project is an organization that aims to facilitate teacher collaboration and policy participation on the state and national level. Its work in Chicago illustrates how teacher engagement can shape reform implementation. When first announced, the Chicago Public Schools' efforts to significantly lengthen the school day had proved to be controversial for several reasons, including the fact that the proposal came in the months leading up to contract negotiations between Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Teachers Union. VIVA teachers collaborated online for two months, arriving at 49 recommendations for how to use the extended school day to best serve the needs of students. They met and shared their ideas with the Chicago Public Schools CEO and the president of the Chicago Teachers Union. VIVA teachers' engagement in the extended school day debate not only demonstrated to the public that many teachers believed a longer day could improve student outcomes *and* teachers' professional development, but its recommendations informed the work of the Longer Day Advisory Council convened by Chicago Public Schools to help shape implementation.² Put another way, they shifted discussion at a critical juncture from *whether* Chicago should prioritize a

longer day to *how* to do so thoughtfully and well.

How is teacher engagement in education reform likely to evolve?

Teacher insight and ideas are increasingly driving and influencing education policy at the local, state, and national levels, and teacher engagement is being fostered across government agencies, advocacy organizations, and think tanks. Most are familiar with the work of Teach Plus, an organization that trains and involves teacher “fellows” around the country in the policy process and is having an increasingly clear impact in shaping policy at the state and district level. In addition, Teach for America is increasingly seeking and finding ways to involve current and recent teachers in policy work. Other state policy and advocacy organizations are looking to engage educators in the policy process, either through an advisory body along the lines of Advance Illinois’s Educator Advisory Council or in other ways.

Finally, even the US Department of Education is moving in this direction. In addition to having teacher ambassadors from across the country, the Department has recently created Project RESPECT—or Recognizing Educational Success, Professional Excellence and Collaborative Teaching—to “directly engage with teachers and principals all across America in a national conversation about teaching.” The Department of Education and others have recognized what is evident from the examples provided here and countless others not mentioned: engaging teachers in the reform process is a powerful lever to generating, supporting, passing, and successfully implementing grounded and informed policies that will help our kids succeed.

¹ It’s worth noting that the EAC and Advance Illinois collaborated with the Illinois Education Association and the Illinois Federation of Teachers in identifying some of the most effective teachers in the state to participate.

² While there is no way to know how central VIVA’s recommendations were to actual implementation decisions and strategies, it is worth noting that many of their recommendations were adopted, including the guiding principles CPS used to govern the work.